

WASHINGTON CIRCLE

HABS NO. DC-688

(Reservation Nos. 25, 26, 27)

Intersection of Pennsylvania and New

Hampshire avenues and 23rd and K streets, NW

Washington

District of Columbia

HABS  
DC  
WASH,  
645-

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey

National Park Service

Department of the Interior

P.O. Box 37127

Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

WASHINGTON CIRCLE  
(Reservation Number 26)

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645-

Location: Intersection of Pennsylvania and New Hampshire avenues and 23rd and K streets, NW.

Owner/Manager: U.S. government, National Park Service.

Present Use: Sitting park, monument site, traffic circle with underpass.

Significance: Included on the L'Enfant and Ellicott plans of the city, this was the first circle to be landscaped as a park. It offers vistas down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the White House, northeast up New Hampshire Avenue to Dupont Circle and due south on 23rd Street to the Lincoln Memorial. The equestrian statue of George Washington is among the American Revolution statues listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.
2. Original and subsequent owners: The land where the circle was planned fell within a tract of land known as the Widow's Mite patented to William Langworth in 1686. In 1791, when the original proprietors donated the land that fell within the planned avenues, Robert Peter owned the part of the tract where this reservation is now located.<sup>1</sup>
3. Original plans and construction: The circle was first laid out in the 1850s with straight paths on line with streets and avenues.
4. Alterations and additions:

1860:	Equestrian statue erected.
1862:	Streetcar tracks installed around the circle.
1885:	Redesigned.
1932:	Landscape restored and redesigned.
1961-62:	K Street underpass constructed.

B. Historical Context:

At the intersection of the city's widest thoroughfare, K Street, and its most important avenue, Pennsylvania Avenue, Andrew Ellicott created a large open circle by carving concavities in the corners of the squares surrounding the intersection. Almost a mile from the President's House and more than two miles

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<sup>1</sup> McNeil, 42, 50.

from the Capitol, this area was somewhat removed from the center of Washington's population at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Although the circle itself marked a relatively high point in the topography, it was on the north edge of a swampy low-lying region known as Foggy Bottom. Foggy Bottom developed throughout the nineteenth century as an industrial area, due to its proximity to the waterfront. The reservation was also located midway between the White House and the bustling port of Georgetown, and would therefore have been passed by almost everyone travelling between these centers of population. Several horse-drawn hackneys and omnibuses ran regular routes along Pennsylvania Avenue past the circle each day.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its location along a well-traveled route, this region was known as a dangerous and disreputable area. The circle at its center was described in 1854 as "unfinished and most unsightly" by Benjamin B. French, a Department of Interior employee charged with overseeing the improvement of the city's public grounds. In 1855, French devised a plan to enclose the circle and lay paths in it on axis with the major intersecting avenues. French saw the various circles and triangles inherent in the plan as potential "oases in the desert of dusty streets, and brick pavements that surround them." He oversaw the improvement of this circle the following year, planting trees and shrubs and enclosing it with a rough wood fence.

As early as 1853, Congress appropriated \$50,000 for the erection of a statue to honor George Washington, and it is possible that the circle was selected as the site for the statue shortly thereafter, prompting its improvement. It was not until 1860, however, that the equestrian portrait of the general was unveiled in the center of the park. Despite the improvement of the park, the area remained relatively uncivilized. On the 1857-61 Boschke map, it appears that the statue stood in a relatively undeveloped area. Although gas lines were laid on the surrounding streets, only two structures appear to face onto the circle. These structures on the northwest side of the circle were perhaps the buildings with octagonal cupolas that prompted Washingtonians to refer to the general region of the circle as "Round Tops." Another building facing onto K Street just west of the circle was built in the 1820s and had been occupied in the 1840s by the very eccentric and unpopular British Minister Henry S. Fox. In 1860 the "gloomy brick house," as one neighbor called it, was converted into a maternity hospital and infant asylum run by Roman Catholic nuns. Called the St. Ann's Infant Asylum, this facility served indigent white women and children until the 1940s.<sup>3</sup>

While the Civil War raged between 1861 and 1864, Washington was converted into the home base for the Union forces. Civic improvements were halted and many parks intended as recreational "oases" became encampment sites for troops mustered to protect the capital city. In an 1865 print, Washington Circle is shown as an enclosed park planted with trees and grass, forming a stark contrast to the scene shown south of the park where rows of army barracks line 23rd Street. The print also shows a horse drawn trolley rounding the park. During the war, the Washington and Georgetown Company laid the first tracks in the city along Pennsylvania Avenue, diverting them around the improved park. Congress encouraged the laying of tracks, stipulating that the gauge used by the horse-drawn streetcars be identical to that of the railroad so they could be used to transport

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<sup>2</sup> Sherwood, 9.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Writers Project, 648; Sherwood, 7.

supplies for the war effort. Due to the general confusion of the war years, Washington Circle was largely neglected as a park, as French described 1865:

The circle, on Pennsylvania, where New Hampshire Avenue intersects it, has been formed, handsomely enclosed with an iron fence, cultivated at much expense, and adorned by the placing in its center of a bronze equestrian statue of Washington, and unless some proper measures are taken to take care of it, it might as well have been left in the state it was before any improvement was made upon it. No money has been appropriated to keep up the improvements upon it or to pay a watchman for taking care of it, and the consequence is that it is filled with cattle and horses, and with gangs of boys who make all sorts of depredations within the enclosure. Scarcely a month passes that I do not receive numerous complaints from the good citizens residing in that neighborhood of the desecration of the circle.<sup>4</sup>

The population surge during the war prompted infrastructural improvements in the late 1860s and 1870s. A territorial government was installed between 1871-74, and the Board of Public Works, under Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, paved and graded miles of unimproved streets. The responsibility for the public grounds was transferred from the Department of Interior to the Department of War in 1867 and the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) was overseen by the Army Corps of Engineers. Chief officer of the OPB&G, Col. Orville E. Babcock, was a friend of Shepherd and the two coordinated their efforts to pave streets and landscape parks in newly developed areas.

Babcock began a campaign to improve the city parks and publish a list identifying all of the government reservations in the city in 1872. Washington Circle was described as, "inclosed with an iron fence; walks laid out but not very well graveled; surrounded by a brick pavement." One of only nine parks that had been fully improved by that date, the fence had been erected in 1869 to protect it. Babcock continued to improve this park, relaying the paths in 1874.

By the 1880s, a full-time watchman was assigned to the park to perform routine maintenance. When the surrounding streets were regraded in the early 1880s, the park, too, needed regrading and the decade-old paths had to be relaid. Curvilinear paths were incorporated into the new path plan and with the remaining paths from the old plan, formed four large oval panels. The tall iron fence was removed in response to public pressure to make the city's parks more democratic. It was probably at this time that the two smaller triangles at the acute angles of two of the adjacent squares, Reservation Nos. 25 and 27, were surrounded with post-and-chain fences and planted with grass and flowers. With the new improvements, Col. A. F. Rockwell noted, "The circle is now becoming a place of resort for the residents in the vicinity."<sup>5</sup> By the 1890s a small lodge had been erected in the circle to shelter the watchman. In a 1905 inventory of trees, the park included as many as forty-eight different species, with almost two-thirds of them imported foreign types. Silver maples encircled the perimeter, and species within the park

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<sup>4</sup> French, 1865, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1885, 2506.

included American and European elms, two umbrella catalpas, six Norway spruces, seven white poplars, three Persian lilacs and five mock oranges. Because the park was guarded by a watchman, the plantings were much denser than they are today.

Accordingly, the circle became a residential area. St. Ann's Infant Asylum was joined on the southeast by St. Paul's Episcopal Church in 1867 and in 1889, Washington architect Thomas Schneider built the town houses known as Schneider Triangle on an entire block northeast of the circle.

Although Foggy Bottom began to decline in the twentieth century as the industries there gradually closed, the Washington Circle area remained relatively prosperous, perhaps due to its location on a major thoroughfare, which only increased in use with the advent of the automobile. During the Depression, Washington Circle was one of the many parks to be refurbished, and in 1932 its old walks were removed and laid out on more classical straight lines. Concrete sandboxes, which had been placed in the park for use by local children were also replaced.<sup>6</sup>

The 1940-50s marked tremendous change for Foggy Bottom and the circle. Because of increased traffic in the area, the park at the center of the intersection came to be seen as more of a hindrance than a place of resort; along with almost all traffic circles in the northwest quadrant of the city, plans were made to redirect traffic on one of the intersecting streets beneath the park through an underpass. Traffic on K Street was subsequently tunnelled under the park. The trolley tracks that had travelled around the circle since the 1860s were removed towards the end of the 1950s.<sup>7</sup>

As the roadway and park were altered, the character of the neighborhood also evolved. The George Washington University, which had moved to Foggy Bottom around 1912, had been expanding throughout the century and by the 1940s sought a location for a hospital. City Square No. 54, southeast of the circle, was selected and the high-rise George Washington University Hospital replaced St. Paul's Episcopal Church in 1948. Today large modern office, hotel, and apartment buildings encircle the park, with the exception of the houses designed by Schneider in 1889--which remain intact and comprise a National Register historic district. When the Metrorail subway system was installed in the 1970s, the Foggy Bottom Station was built south of Washington Circle.

## PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

- A. Overall dimensions: The circular park covers about 2.19 acres.
- B. Materials:
  - 1. Pathways, paving: The circle has no perimeter sidewalks, and the interior path pattern is much the same as it was originally laid out in the 1850s. Wide footpaths continue the lines of Pennsylvania and New Hampshire avenues intersected by two concentric circular paths. The Pennsylvania Avenue paths are divided by oblong panels planted with flowers. All paths are covered by concrete pavers except the innermost circular path which

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<sup>6</sup> Annual Report . . ., 1932, 34.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison, 10-12.

features unevenly coursed flagstone pavers. Reservation Nos. 25 and 27 are surrounded by wide perimeter walks and quarter-round coping.

2. Vegetation:

- a. Grass: The four paths leading to the center of the circle delineate four sodded panels inside of the circular path and four outside abutting the street.
- b. Trees, shrubs, hedges: A continuous formal hedge surrounds the circle on the outside of the interior circular path. Ornamental and shade trees are planted evenly throughout the sodded areas. Reservation Nos. 25 and 27 are both nearly covered with large shrub beds.
- c. Flowers, seasonal plantings: There are two rectangular flower beds placed within the interior path on the axis of Pennsylvania Avenue. Both are planted with seasonal flowers.

3. Structures:

- a. Fences, gates, retaining walls: Modern metal post-and-chain fencing surrounds the interior panels and the central mound upon which the statue stands.
- b. Benches: Concrete-support wood-slat benches face into the park from the interior paths.
- c. Statues: The Lt. Gen. George Washington statue designed by sculptor Clark Mills was erected in the center of the circle in 1860. The bronze equestrian statue is mounted on a marble pedestal.
- d. Lighting: Mushroom-type lamps are placed around the inner and outer circular paths.
- e. Metro grating: Metal Metrorail ventilation grates are located in the northwest side of the circle in the sodded area near the roadway.

C. Site:

1. Character of surrounding structures: This mixed-use area features a hospital and university parking lot to the south, three-story Victorian town houses to the north, and high-rise office and apartment buildings.
2. Traffic patterns: The circle is located in a congested section of the city and a heavy flow of traffic travels counter-clockwise around it. To relieve some of the congestion, K Street has been rerouted as an underpass.
3. Vistas:
  - a. Northeast: Vista along New Hampshire Avenue to Dupont Circle

interrupted by overhanging trees.

- b. East: Vista along K Street to Mount Vernon Square
- c. Southeast: Vista along Pennsylvania Avenue to the White House.
- d. South: Vista along 23rd Street to the Lincoln Memorial is interrupted by tree branches.
- e. Southwest: Vista along New Hampshire Avenue to the Kennedy Center.
- f. West: Vista along K Street to the Key Bridge.

### PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

#### A. Maps:

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

District of Columbia Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Plan of the City of Washington, District of Columbia, showing the Public Reservations." Prepared by Orville E. Babcock. 1871.

Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

#### B. Park plans and early views: See Supplemental Information below for a list of additional attached plans and early views. Additional plans are located at the Office of Land Use, National Capital Region.

1853: Park plan showing paths on axis with intersection avenues and streets, (NARA, RG42 NCP-0-23).

1899: Photograph of Washington Circle (Annual Report . . ., 1899).

1927: Survey photograph of Washington Circle (NPS Reservation Files).

#### C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1867-1933.

Federal Writers' Project. Washington, City and Capital. American Guide Series.  
Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1937.

French, Benjamin B. "Annual Report of the Commissioner of Public Buildings,"  
Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior. 1865.

"Government Reservations within the City Boundaries." City Lots. Real Estate  
Directory (NARA RG42 230).

Harrison, S. R. "Modern Street Intersection Design, Washington, D.C."  
Washington, D.C: American Road Builders' Association, Municipal  
Bulletin No. 131, 1948.

McNeil, Priscilla W. "Rock Creek Hundred: Land Conveyed for the Federal City."  
Washington History 3 (Spring/Summer, 1991): 34-51.

National Register of Historic Places nomination forms for the following districts:  
Foggy Bottom, Schneider Triangle, and Revolutionary War Statuary, Civil  
War Statuary.

Record Group 42. National Archives and Records Administration.

Reservation Files. Office of Land Use. National Capital Region. National Park  
Service.

Sherwood, Suzanne Berry. Foggy Bottom 1800-1975. Washington, D.C.: George  
Washington University, 1978.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold  
Project Historian  
National Park Service  
1993

#### PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

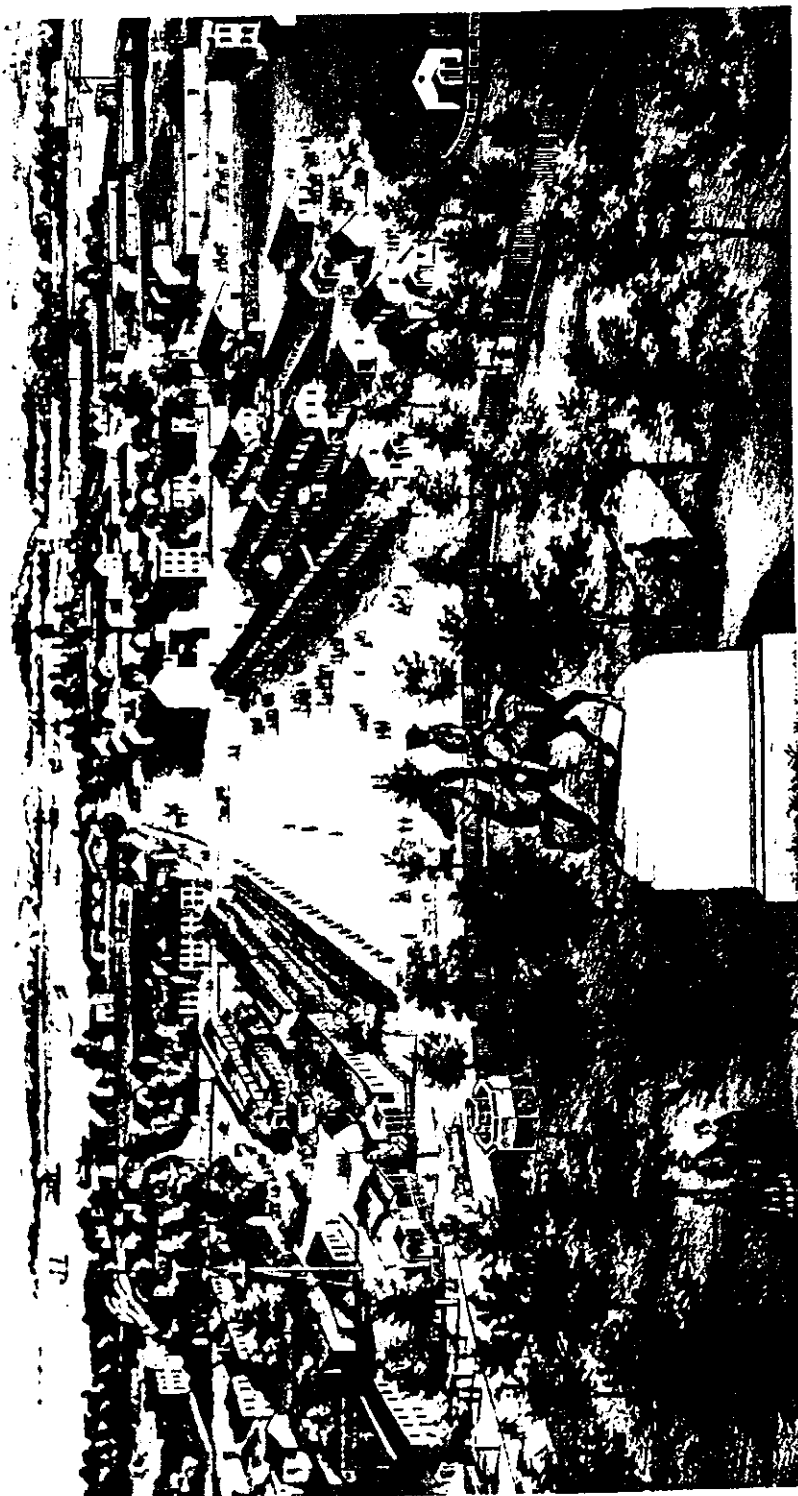
The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.

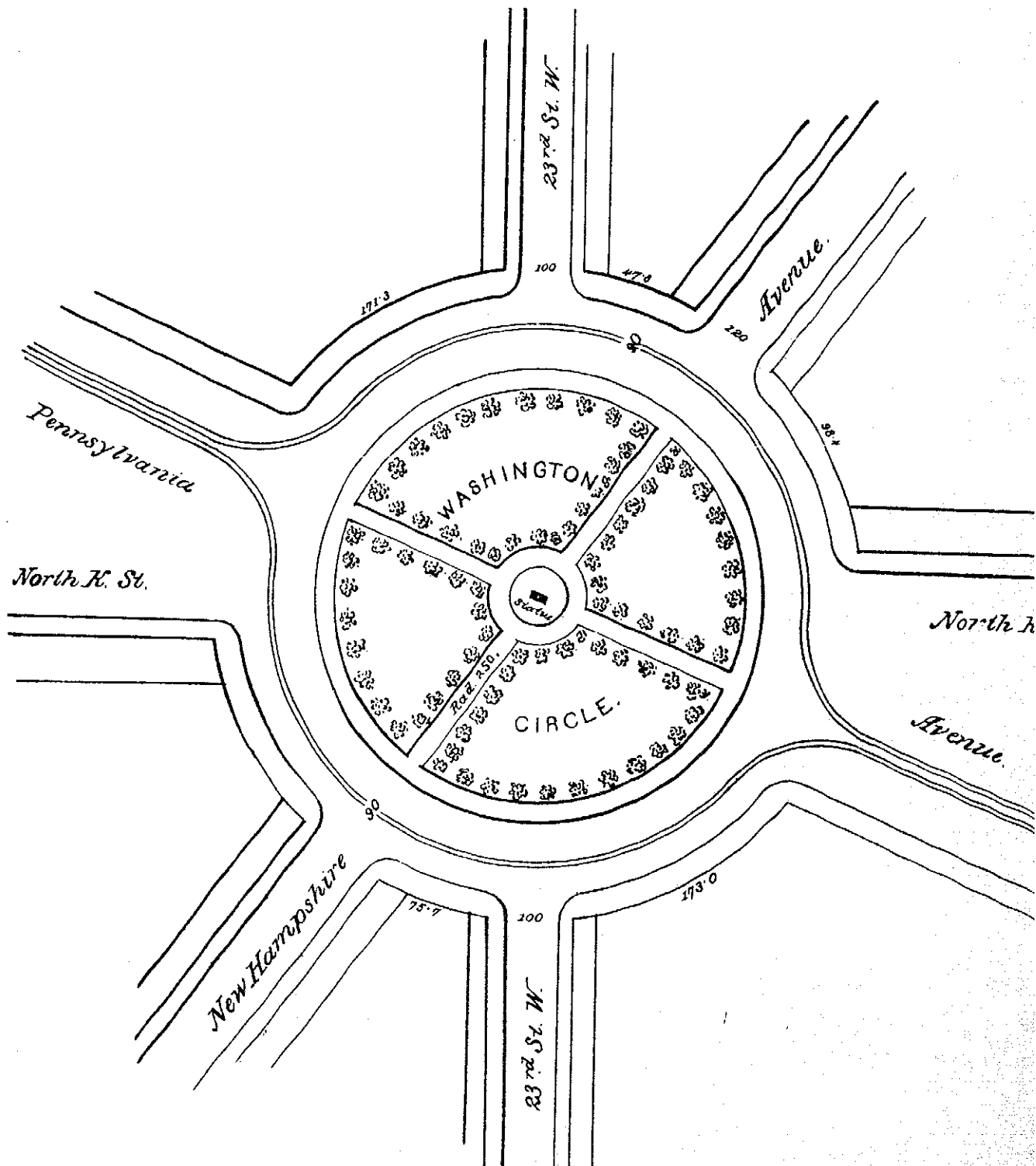


PART V.      SUPPLEMENTAL INFORMATION

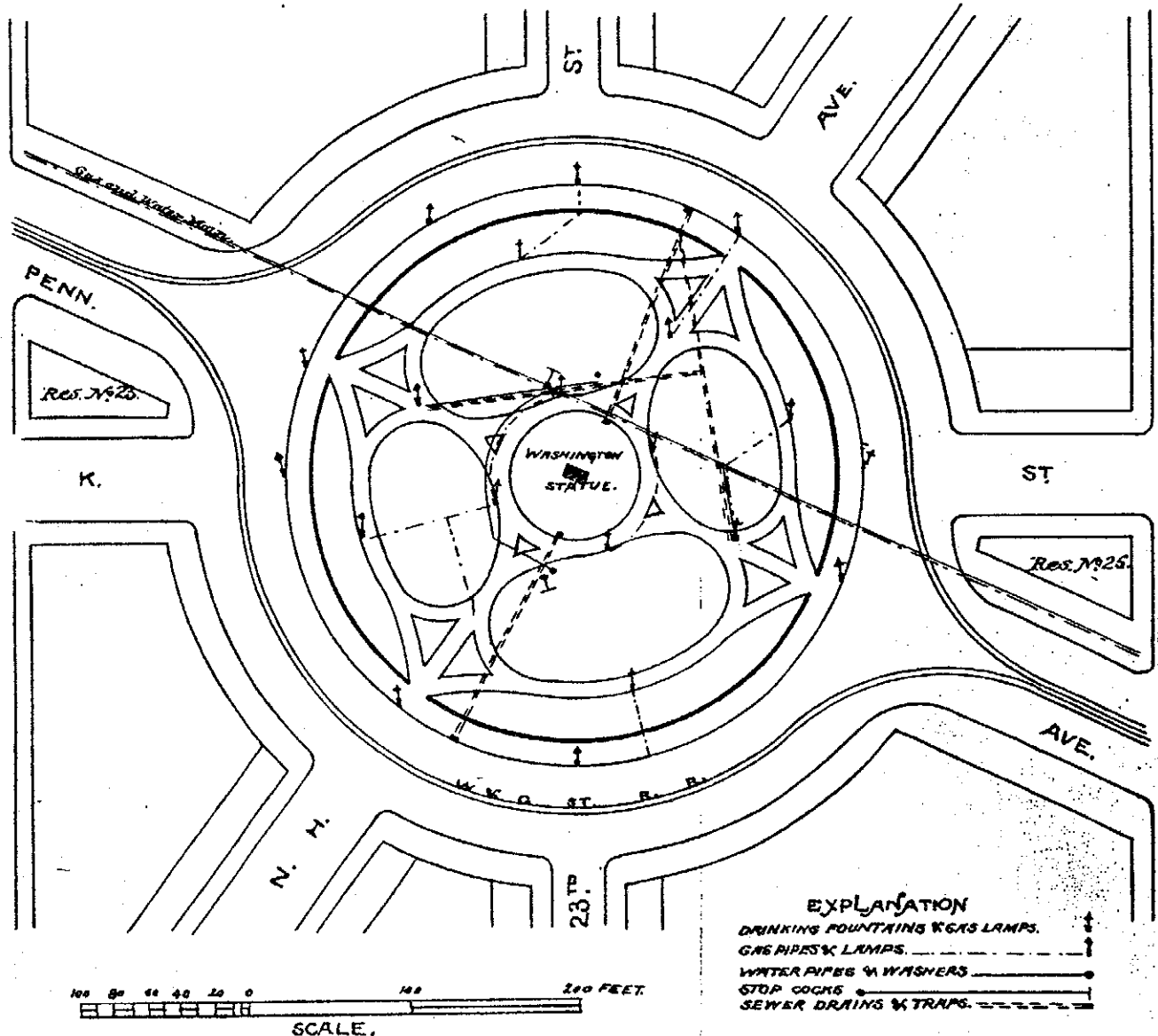
Page 9	1865:	Print of Washington Circle showing 23rd street south of the circle flanked by army barracks (Goode, <u>Outdoor Sculpture</u> , 357).
Page 10	1876:	Park plan showing paths on axis with the intersection avenues, and the location of the statue and trees ( <u>City Lots</u> , NARA RG42 230).
Page 11	1885:	Park plan showing path layout, streetcar tracks and the locations of gas and water pipes, lamps, and drinking fountains ( <u>Annual Report</u> . . . , 1886).
Page 12	1903:	Photograph of the Washington Statue ( <u>Annual Report</u> . . . , 1903).
Page 13, 14	1905:	Plan showing locations of trees with accompanying list of species ( <u>Annual Report</u> . . . , 1905).
Page 15	1932:	Walks and planting plan also including detail of sandboxes (NPS Reservation Files).
Page 16	1948:	Street intersection design, before and after plans for an underpass (Harrison, 11).



**I.** Washington Circle  
HABS No. DC-688 (Page 10)



# WASHINGTON CIRCLE.

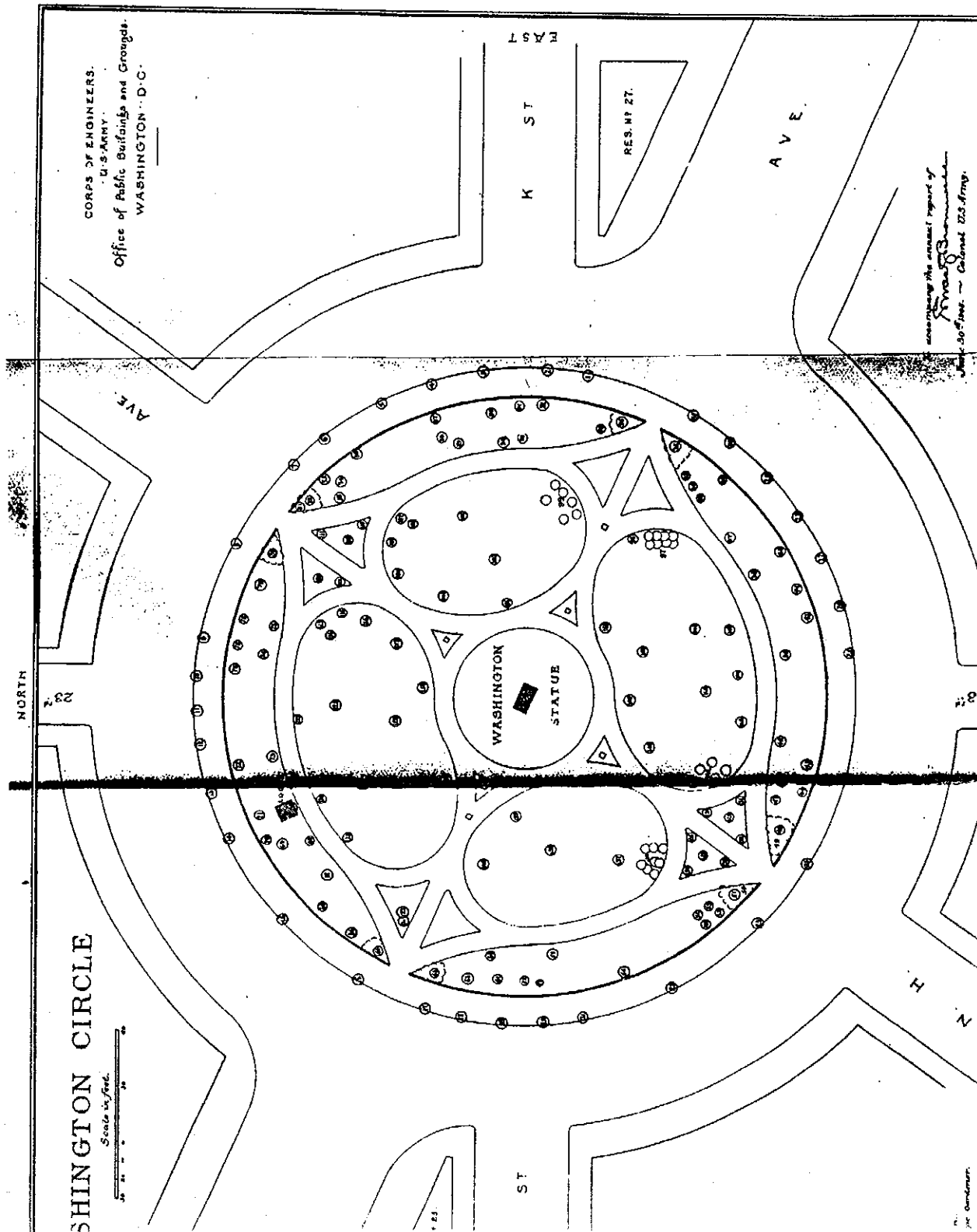


To accompany Annual Report of Officer  
in Charge of Public Buildings and Grounds  
for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1886.

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GENERAL WASHINGTON, WASHINGTON CIRCLE, PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE AND  
TWENTY-THIRD STREET.



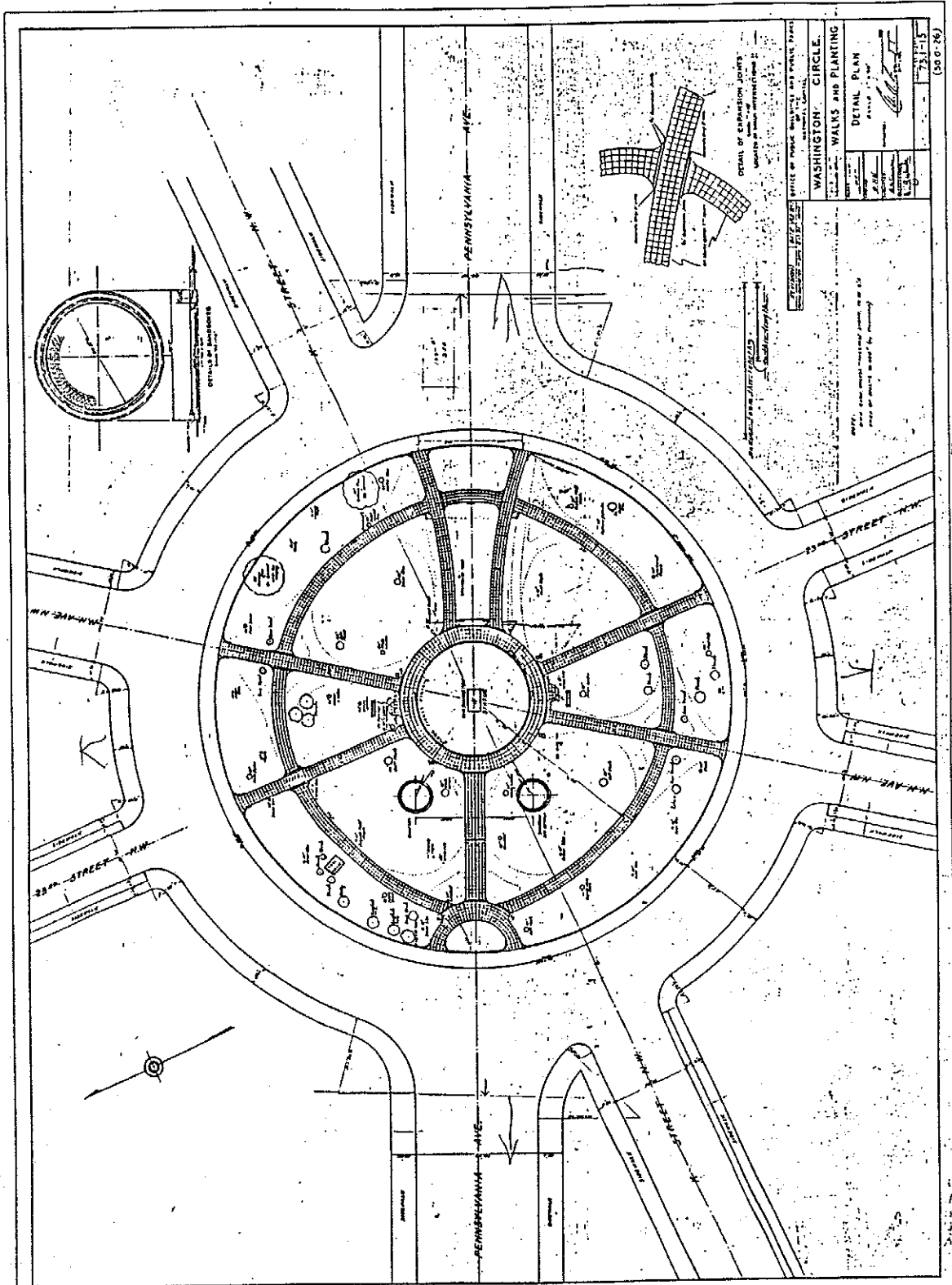
2770 REPORT OF THE CHIEF OF ENGINEERS, U. S. ARMY.

WASHINGTON CIRCLE.

Numbers.	Common name.	Botanical name.	Designation.
1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 62, 65, 88, 104, 120, 137, 138.	Silver maple.....	<i>Acer saccharinum</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
4, 14, 25, 28, 51.....	Sycamore maple.....	<i>Acer pseudo-platanus</i> ..	Do.
32, 63, 64, 96.....	Spanish bayonet.....	<i>Yucca filamentosa</i> .....	Native evergreen shrub.
33, 95, 106, 107.....	Indian currant.....	<i>Symphoricarpus vul-</i> <i>garia</i> .....	Native deciduous shrub.
34.....	Lavallee Weigela.....	<i>Weigela lavallee</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
35.....	Japan Judas.....	<i>Cercis japonica</i> .....	Do.
36.....	Japan Mahonia.....	<i>Mahonia japonica</i> .....	Foreign evergreen shrub.
37, 59, 76.....	English field maple.....	<i>Acer campestre</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
38.....	Pagoda tree.....	<i>Sophora japonica</i> .....	Do.
39, 101.....	Fern-leaved beech.....	<i>Fagus heterophylla</i> .....	Do.
40, 100, 150.....	American elm.....	<i>Ulmus americana</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
46.....	American beech.....	<i>Fagus americana</i> .....	Do.
41, 54, 56, 70, 72, 76, 77	White poplar.....	<i>Populus alba</i> .....	Do.
43.....	Carolina buck thorn.....	<i>Rhamnus caroliniana</i> .....	Do.
44, 79.....	Red ash.....	<i>Fraxinus pennsylvanica</i>	Do.
45, 69, 93.....	Perdan lilac.....	<i>Syringa perdisca</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
47, 74.....	Purple-leaved plum.....	<i>Prunus pissardii</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
48, 83, 85, 136.....	Rough-leaved Deutzia.....	<i>Deutzia scabra</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
49, 50, 80, 81.....	Naked jessamine.....	<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i> .....	Do.
51.....	Camperdown elm.....	<i>Ulmus scabra pendula</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
52.....	Tartarian honeysuckle.....	<i>Lonicera tartarica</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
53, 78.....	Althea.....	<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i> .....	Do.
55, 68.....	Umbrella catalpa.....	<i>Catalpa timbraculifera</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
57, 84, 141.....	Pearl bush.....	<i>Excochorda grandiflora</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
60, 89.....	Chinese privet.....	<i>Ligustrum sinensis</i> .....	Do.
61.....	False indigo bush.....	<i>Amorpha fruticosa</i> .....	Native deciduous shrub.
64, 68, 86, 91.....	Cornelian cherry.....	<i>Cornus mascula</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
67, 149.....	Purple beech.....	<i>Fagus sylvatica pur-</i> <i>purea</i> .....	Do.
71.....	Allspice bush.....	<i>Calycanthus florida</i> .....	Native deciduous shrub.
73.....	Bishop's Cap.....	<i>Halecia tetraptera</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
82, 116, 117, 148.....	American linden.....	<i>Tilia americana</i> .....	Do.
87.....	Virginia fringe tree.....	<i>Chionanthus virginica</i> .....	Native deciduous shrub.
90.....	Judas tree.....	<i>Cercis canadensis</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
92.....	European elm.....	<i>Ulmus montana</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
94.....	do.....	<i>Ulmus campestris</i> .....	Do.
97, 99.....	Panicle-flowering Hydran-	<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>	Foreign deciduous shrub.
96.....	gea.....	<i>grandiflora</i> .....	
103, 118, 119, 139.....	Oak-leaved hydrangea.....	<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i> .....	Native deciduous shrub.
102.....	Silver-leaved linden.....	<i>Tilia europaea argentea</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
105, 113, 114, 115, 142.....	American Arbor vite.....	<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> .....	Native evergreen tree.
108, 109, 123, 129.....	Mock orange.....	<i>Philadelphus corona-</i> <i>ria</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
110, 111, 112, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135.....	Boxwood.....	<i>Buxus sempervirens</i> .....	Foreign evergreen shrub.
121.....	Slender Deutzia.....	<i>Deutzia gracilis</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
122, 140.....	English yew.....	<i>Taxus baccata</i> .....	Foreign evergreen tree.
123.....	Horse-chestnut.....	<i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i> .....	Foreign deciduous tree.
124.....	Purple-leaved maple.....	<i>Acer pseudo-platanus</i> <i>variegata purpureum</i> .....	Do.
147, 125, 126, 144, 145, 146.....	Japanese maple.....	<i>Acer polymorphum</i> .....	Do.
127, 143.....	Norway spruce.....	<i>Picea excelsa</i> .....	Foreign evergreen tree.
151.....	Vine maple.....	<i>Acer circinatum</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
	Alder tree.....	<i>Alnus acuminata</i> .....	Do.

SHERMAN PLAZA.

1, 2, 12, 13.....	Groups of panicle-flower-	<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>	Foreign deciduous shrub.
3, 4, 9, 10.....	ing hydrangea.....	<i>grandiflora</i> .....	Do.
5, 8.....	Groups of purple barberry.....	<i>Berberis purpurea</i> .....	Native evergreen tree.
6, 7.....	Hemlock fr.....	<i>Thuja canadensis</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.
11, 14, 54, 55, 56, 57, 58, 65, 66, 67, 68 69.....	Groups of Thunberg's bar-	<i>Berberis thunbergii</i> .....	Native evergreen tree.
15, 22, 29, 36.....	berry.....		
16, 17, 23, 24, 30, 31, 32, 33.....	White spruce.....	<i>Picea alba</i> .....	Native evergreen tree.
18, 19, 32, 33.....	Variegated Arbor vite.....	<i>Thuja vervana</i> .....	Native evergreen shrub.
20, 21, 34, 35.....	Variegated Retinospora.....	<i>Retinospora pisifera</i> <i>aurea</i> .....	Foreign evergreen tree.
	Red flowering dogwood.....	<i>Cornus florida rubra</i> .....	Native deciduous tree.
	Althea.....	<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i> .....	Foreign deciduous shrub.





MODERN STREET INTERSECTION DESIGN, WASHINGTON, D.C.

